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From the Baltimore Sun

End of the road for Schaefer

Franchot edges Owens to win Democratic nomination for state comptroller

By Stephanie Desmon
Sun reporter

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In the fiercest battle of a political career that has spanned six decades, Maryland Comptroller William Donald Schaefer came up short in his re-election bid this morning as Montgomery County Del. Peter Franchot secured the Democratic nomination for state comptroller.

Franchot garnered 36 percent of the vote, narrowly outpacing Anne Arundel County Executive Janet S. Owens, who had 34 percent. Schaefer was third with 30 percent -- 32,000 votes behind Franchot.

"The best man won," Schaefer said today at an 11:30 a.m. news conference.

"I didn't think I was going to lose," he said, but Franchot "ran a good race, and I wish him luck."

When told he had been declared the winner, Franchot said, "Isn't that something?"

"I really do salute William Donald Schaefer for everything he has done, and Janet Owens was a very able county executive and a great opponent," he said. "But I particularly reach out and salute one of Maryland's giants, William Donald Schaefer."

Franchot will face Republican Anne M. McCarthy, the former University of Baltimore business school dean, in the November election.

Franchot planned to speak at a 2 p.m. press conference in Takoma Park.

The Democratic primary campaign had become a referendum on Schaefer: Many voters interviewed yesterday were either fervent supporters of the comptroller, siding with him as a tribute to his many years in office, or against him, not true backers of either opponent but passionate that it was time for Schaefer to go.

"I have been a William Donald Schaefer fan ever since I've been voting," said Liberian Massey, a retired Social Security Administration manager who cast a ballot for Franchot at the Waxter Center for Senior Citizens in Baltimore.

"My mother was a Schaefer fan. We all liked him. Back then, his view used to be amusing. Now it's just foolishness," she said.

When asked who she voted for, Susan Redmond, a retired secretary from Catonsville, replied: "It wasn't Schaefer, I know that." She soon remembered she chose Owens.

At Dalesio's restaurant in Little Italy, Schaefer - the 84-year-old fixture of Maryland politics - was met early in the evening by several dozen supporters and a phalanx of television cameras.

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He readily told reporters who greeted him at the door that it was the worst campaign of his life, one he called "nasty" and marred by "innuendo." He was ushered upstairs to a private room where he was roundly applauded.

Like many at the party last night, speechwriter Vicki Lathom, who has worked for Schaefer for 11 years, was staunchly protective of her longtime boss and disappointed that his more provocative comments have overshadowed his accomplishments.

"Things have changed in the last 20 years, the political correctness," she said. "People want you to speak your mind. They love it. But then you speak your mind, and the sky falls."

The tone of the comptroller's race grew unpleasant in its waning days, with Schaefer making disparaging remarks about Owens, 62.

He called her a "Mother Hubbard" and said she looked like a "great-great-grandmother," was "getting fat" and that "her husband rules her" - all comments made in front of reporters, all just days after he released a radio ad in which he apologized to anyone he might have offended previously.

Owens was outraged by the remarks. Schaefer refused to apologize, then accused her of "age discrimination" based on a remark she made in May: that telling him she would challenge him was like telling a grandfather it was time to give up the car keys.

Franchot, 58, was on the sidelines during much of the name-calling, urging his opponents to talk about the issues. He called himself the only "true Democrat" in the race, linking Schaefer and Owens to Republican Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. In ads, Franchot called the three "peas in a pod" and accused them of being pro-sprawl and pro-slot machines.

He also picked up newspaper endorsements - and many endorsements from unions and progressive groups.

A five-term delegate, Franchot entered the race nearly a year ago, long before Owens, who has been county executive since 1998, decided to make a run for the job of the state's chief tax collector.

As the year went by, Schaefer began to look more and more vulnerable.

The former city councilman, Baltimore mayor and Maryland governor was always an outspoken character, but in recent years, his antics sometimes got more attention than the civic works for which he was long known.

He used bimonthly public meetings of the state Board of Public Works, on which he sits with the governor and treasurer, as a soapbox for his views, which sometimes drew criticism.

He once called for a registry of AIDS patients, calling them a "danger" who "bring it on themselves." Prompted by a visit to a local McDonald's, he launched into a tirade about immigrants, saying they should learn to speak English.

This year, he was roundly condemned for making suggestive comments to a female aide of the governor who had just given him a mug of tea and walked away. He commanded her to return and "Walk again" as he watched.

For 50 years, he never lost an election. His storied career in politics dates to 1955, when he was first elected to the Baltimore City Council. There was a brief hiatus when his second term as governor ended in 1995, but he made a high-profile comeback.

Ninety minutes before a candidate filing deadline in 1998 - and just days after the death of longtime Comptroller Louis L. Goldstein - Schaefer became a candidate for the job.

He won the race with 62 percent of the vote in the general election.

Last night, as the evening wore on, some Schaefer supporters said they were worried about what would become of the man who has held nearly every important job in Maryland politics.

"It's not looking good," said the comptroller's spokesman, Michael Golden, who has worked with Schaefer for 20 years. "I just never thought this would happen. I mean, he was an 800-pound gorilla."

And what were Schaefer's plans, if he were to learn he had lost for the first time since a failed bid for the House of Delegates in 1954?

"I don't know," he said not long after polls closed. "I may run again. Hopefully, I'm not just going to sit in a chair and rock."